

Christmas Day – Mass at Midnight A – B – C

First Reading Isaiah 9:2-7

The people that walked in darkness has seen a great light; on those who live in a land of deep shadow a light has shone. You have made their gladness greater, you have made their joy increase; they rejoice in your presence as men rejoice at harvest time, as men are happy when they are dividing the spoils.

For the yoke that was weighing on him, the bar across his shoulders, the rod of his oppressor, these you break as on the day of Midian. For all the footgear of battle, every cloak rolled in blood, is burnt, and consumed by fire. For there is a child born for us, a son given to us and dominion is laid on his shoulders; and this is the name they give him: Wonder-Counsellor, Mighty-God, Eternal-Father, Prince-of-Peace. Wide is his dominion in a peace that has no end, for the throne of David and for his royal power, which he establishes and makes secure in justice and integrity. From this time onwards and for ever, the jealous love of the Lord of hosts will do this.

Second Reading Titus 2:11-14

God's grace has been revealed, and it has made salvation possible for the whole human race and taught us that what we have to do is to give up everything that does not lead to God, and all our worldly ambitions; we must be self-restrained and live good and religious lives here in this present world, while we are waiting in hope for the blessing which will come with the Appearing of the glory of our great God and saviour Christ Jesus. He sacrificed himself for us in order to set us free from all wickedness and to purify a people so that it could be his very own and would have no ambition except to do good.

Gospel Luke 2:1-14

Now at this time Caesar Augustus issued a decree for a census of the whole world to be taken.

This census – the first – took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria, and everyone went to his own town to be registered. So Joseph set out from the town of Nazareth in Galilee and travelled up to Judaea, to the town of David called Bethlehem, since he was of David's House and line, in order to be registered together with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. While they were there the time came for her to have her child, and she gave birth to a son, her first-born. She wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger because there was no room for them at the inn. In the countryside close by there were shepherds who lived in the fields and took it in turns to watch their flocks during the night.

The angel of the Lord appeared to them and the glory of the Lord shone round them. They were terrified, but the angel said, "Do not be afraid. Listen, I bring you news of great joy, a joy to be shared by the whole people. Today in the town of David a saviour has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord.

And here is a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger."

And suddenly with the angel there was a great throng of the heavenly host, praising God and singing: "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and peace to men who enjoy his favour".

Meditation

The eyes of faith see human history as salvation history. God's actions are discerned in the mundane and dramatic events that we live. Israelites saw God's call in the migration of their ancestor Abraham.

Their later escape from Egypt was not just a natural phenomenon of low tide in the Reed Sea. It was the hand of God acting through Moses. David, son of Jesse, was the brave leader and king, exercising power from God in new ways for new historical and sociological circumstances. Israel's later exile was still another meeting of God's power, a judgement on their infidelity. Even in such dark times, indeed especially in darkness, the light of God shines in history. The people were able to say: "You shall be called 'My Delight' and your land 'Espoused'. For the Lord delights in you."

Those who walked in darkness were able to see a great light. This is the heart of the Christmas mystery.

God always takes the initiative. We are ever in awe before the hope enfleshed in history.

The Christmas Midnight gospel is by far the most popular passage for this day. The other selections are rich in history, theology, and poetry, but we keep returning to Luke 2. The details are simple: Caesar Augustus ordering a census, Joseph and Mary travelling to David's town of Bethlehem, a firstborn son wrapped in swaddling clothes. Yet the mystery and power they evoke are beyond telling.

We might remember school plays and blankets used as costumes. We might thrill at brilliant musical tributes to this babe. And then we might feel a tug at the conscience. Jesus did appear first to the poor shepherds. His presence calls us to live "temperately, justly, and devoutly." Through all these emotions and nostalgia the simple truth is opened for our assent: God has visited us.